

i was not magnificent. by hannahsviolets

Series: [steve harrington's coming out story](#). [1]

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Summary:

“I’m a freak. I’m not even a freak because freaks at least fit in with each other. I don’t fit in with anyone,”

“Those kids love you. You fit in with them,”

-

Steve struggles with his sexuality, mental health, unrequited love and an eating disorder that he'd really like to keep a secret.

i was not magnificent.

Author's Note:

PLEASE READ: this fic may be extremely triggering for some people.

i wrote this fic mainly as a comfort piece for myself. i am bisexual. i am bulimic. i am a suicide survivor. please don't think that i'm romantacizing mental illness because i've dealt with all of these things personally, and i can promise you that there's nothing beautiful or romantic about them. i wrote this fic to help myself deal with trauma. with that being said, i hope that you can find some enjoyment in reading.

one of the lines in here is 100% stolen from skins, but i felt that it worked in the context of steve/nancy.

this fic also isn't very nancy friendly, but steve has every right to be bitter and angry with her so fuck that noise.

Steve Harrington didn't realize that he was different until he was ten years old. When he watched movies and TV, he'd always had crushes on the boys and the girls. He'd thought that everyone else liked boys and girls too, that they didn't just pick one or the other, and he certainly didn't think that there was anything wrong with a boy liking another boy or a girl liking another girl.

It was only when he was watching *Happy Days* with his parents and mentioned that he thought Fonzie was cute, did he come face to face with reality. Honestly, Steve hadn't even meant to say it out loud. Talking about crushes with your parents was just *weird* to begin with, so it had just sort of slipped out. Steve quickly realized that it was one of the dumbest things he'd ever said.

"What?" asked his father.

"Nothing," Steve muttered, embarrassed.

"It sounded like you just called a boy *cute*," he repeated. Steve's mother shook her head, like she was hoping that he wouldn't press the issue.

"I – I . . . sorry,"

"It's not just 'sorry,' Steven. You can't call another boy 'cute.' Boys aren't cute. You should find girls cute. I won't tolerate having a faggot for a son,"

Steve had no idea what a faggot was, but assumed it meant something awful. He wanted to tell his dad that he did find girls cute, but he couldn't find the courage to even speak. His father could be very scary sometimes.

"Do you understand me?" the large man repeated.

Steve nodded profusely.

"Good. Turn the TV off, Miriam," he stood up from the couch and began walking out of the room. "Steve's just ruined the whole god damn night. I'm going to bed,"

Steve wanted to cry. He knew that he couldn't, though. It would just make his father even angrier. When his father was up the stairs, his mother opened up her arms and Steve crawled into them, resting his chin on her shoulder. She understood Steve far better than her husband did.

"I know you didn't mean it that way, baby," she whispered into his ear. "I know you're not a fag,"

He could ask his mom what that was without getting yelled at. "What's a fag?"

"It's a freak of nature, is what it is. It's a boy who likes boys the way he's supposed to like girls,"

"What if he likes both?" Steve asked.

His mother laughed. "That's not possible. You're either normal or you're a freak,"

It was the first time she hadn't been able to make Steve feel better. He thought that he actually preferred hearing his father demean him, because at least he was used to that. His mother was supposed to protect him. She was supposed to be on his side and here she was, telling him he was a freak. He wasn't normal. How could that be? He had so many friends at school! They made fun of freaks all the time, so Steve couldn't be one.

"Joanie's pretty," Steve said, even though he'd never really noticed her before. "She's cute,"

His mother ruffled his hair. "That's my little ladies' man,"

She pulled him into a hug and he relaxed into it, wanting to believe that the comfort she was giving him was real. He knew then that if he were anything but normal, his parents wouldn't love him. He wouldn't be good enough for them. It might be okay though, he thought. He might be able to be normal. Steve liked girls. He'd kissed Maddie Gibbons behind the school last week. Girls were cute, it was just that boys were cute too.

Whatever.

He didn't have to think that boys were cute anymore. It was something he could live without. Besides, he was just a kid. Love wasn't something that kids were meant to worry about. Then again, Steve had realized then that he wasn't like other kids, so maybe he was meant to worry about love. Maybe freaks spent all their time worrying about dating and worrying about people finding out about them. Steve thought that they were dumb. All they had to do was date girls and they would be normal. Who cared if they only liked boys? It was more important to be normal than to be happy.

But what did that make him then? His mother said that you couldn't like boys and girls. Maybe it was one of those things that only made sense when you got older. Maybe it was one of those things that he would grow out of, like *Sesame Street* or *The Brady Bunch*.

When Steve went to bed that night, he prayed that he would wake up normal, that this phase would be over and done with. He never

wanted his parents to hate him or wish for a better son. His mother used to call him “her perfect little man.” He wanted to always be her perfect little man and he couldn’t be that if he wasn’t normal.

The phase wasn’t over and done with. Years passed and Steve wondered if it was even a phase at all. He wondered if there was something genuinely wrong with him, if he was sick or something. Boys at school said that faggots were sick in the mind and the body and that they were spreading their disease across the world. Steve always agreed with them, making sure his comments were the meanest of all. Then he’d go home and throw up.

The worst thing was in middle school, when they were made to start showering after basketball practice. Steve had spent the entire time cowering in the very last shower, terrified that he would look too long at someone. The guys made ‘jokes’ along the lines of “I better not catch you staring at me, queer,” but they all seemed playful about it, as if no one in the locker room was secretly interested. Steve knew that if they were to find out that he was interested, they wouldn’t be so playful. They’d probably beat the shit out of him.

He learned to shower in two minutes, flat. He was out of there before most of the boys had even gotten unchanged. It was the safest option, and really, his only option. He couldn’t risk staying in there too long and popping a boner. He wouldn’t have an excuse for it like he did in class, when they were surrounded by girls.

Steve still thought girls were beautiful and he liked talking with them more than he liked talking with boys. They were easy to relate to and they were easier to understand than boys were. Steve was always worried he was going to say the wrong thing with boys. Talking to girls came to him naturally, as did kissing them. There was nothing in the world that Steve loved more than kissing girls.

Thankfully, that was enough for people not to question why he had a poster of Harrison Ford as Han Solo in his locker.

Basketball was still meant to just be a fun, recreational activity in middle school that anyone who wanted to was allowed to play. Still, it was a sport and boys playing sports meant cheerleaders. After the games, the best athletes on each team would go out to the most popular diner and split apart into couples halfway through. Steve almost always left with a different girl, but it wasn't as if they were doing anything scandalous, unless you considered making out behind the nearby roller rink to be particularly improper.

According to the cheerleaders, Steve was the best kisser on the basketball team. Allison Cummings whispered it to him when he walked her home one evening.

"Everyone told me you were a great kisser. To be honest, I thought they were just saying so cause you're cute,"

Steve had feigned confidence, which girls loved. "Great kisser, huh?"

"Yep. They said you're the best of the team, even better than Justin, and he dated that high school girl."

The whole conversation made Steve feel good about himself for once. He felt like maybe he wasn't a complete waste of space, like he'd finally found something to be genuinely confident in. He was good at basketball, sure, but so were a lot of other people, and they were way better than he was. He'd never given a shit about school, only maintaining a C average to keep his father off his back.

Everything should've been perfect, but it just . . . wasn't. He still hated himself. He still had wet dreams about guys that left him crying for hours out of fear. He still wasn't normal.

In health class, the gym coach was talking about eating disorders. He mentioned something called bulimia, which is when girls make themselves throw up. Steve hadn't thought much of it at the time because really, eating disorders were a girl thing. They didn't concern him.

But then about a week later, his father spent all of dinner ranting about "this faggot at work" who was "rubbing his homo hands all

over my paperwork” and Steve felt sick to his stomach. He excused himself to the bathroom, kneeling down in front of the toilet, waiting for the vomit to come up. When it didn’t, he remembered back to what his coach had said about bulimia. It was a disorder, but not if you only do it one time.

And so he did it.

And it felt so good. It felt like he was washing all of the bad out of his body, like he was cleansing himself of those dumb gay feelings. And the sweating and the watery eyes and the discomfort in the back of his throat were what he deserved. Freaks like him deserved to be in pain.

It didn’t just happen that one time.

It happened a week later, after he didn’t make a basket in a big game. It happened a couple of days after that, when he failed a test and his father sat him down for a good hour, telling him how badly he’d messed up. It happened a week after that, when he said something dumb to Randall Hartley and the guys laughed at him like he was some joke.

It happened all the time after that.

No one seemed to notice, and that’s what made it okay.

His parents weren’t home too often anymore either and when they were, it seemed like they were always screaming at each other. His mom had caught his dad with one of his secretaries, and she wasn’t letting him sleep in bed with her anymore. Steve didn’t understand how that was going to fix their relationship, because it gave his dad all night to fuck whoever he wanted. His mom figured that out pretty quickly and began insisting that he sleep in bed with her (“But only so I know you’re not out screwing some cheap whore”).

“Promise me you’ll never be like him, baby,” Steve was rubbing her back, attempting to comfort her after an abnormally explosive argument.

“I promise, Ma,”

She placed her hands on his cheeks and squeezed his face together. “You’re such a good boy, you know that? Such a good, good boy. I can’t believe you came from your father,”

“I like to think I’m more you,” Steve chuckled.

That made her smile. He always felt so proud when he did that.

Dad never hugged him. Steve supposed that he used to, when he was a baby, but he couldn’t remember ever hugging him. He’d always been very frightened of his father, and thought (even as a young child) that their relationship would be better off if they only interacted when they needed to. His mom always tried to get the three of them together, to go on fancy vacations and act like a perfect family, but those vacations were always silent and left Steve feeling lonely. He’d watch other families at the beach, building sandcastles and body surfing the waves, and picture himself with them. His parents acted proper and sophisticated, even when they were supposed to be resting. His father went sailing and his mother sat in the sand, reading her book.

“Play by yourself, Steven,” or “Entertain yourself, Steven,”

At the end of the vacation, they’d go sailing with his father, who was always in a terrible mood because he claimed that his wife and son made a mess. When he got a bit older, Steve just sat perfectly still, trying not to fuck things up until they took the family photo that his mother really wanted. She’d frame it in the hallway so that when they had guests, they could see that a loving family lived in their home.

Steve loved his parents, but he wasn’t sure that they were a loving family, or anything close.

If they were, they probably would’ve noticed how much vomit he was flushing down the toilet.

Tommy asked him about it once. Steve left basketball practice early, claiming that he was sick, but really spent the whole time hauled up in the boy’s bathroom, trying to convince himself to purge. Tommy had seen him leave, and asked why he hadn’t just gone to the

nurse.

“Oh, uh, I just ate some of that shit cafeteria food and I guess I have uh, food poisoning. If I’m just gonna throw up, there’s no point in going to the nurse,”

“I had some of that food too. Shit, what do you think it was? Was it the chicken nuggets? Fuck, I always say those are made from rubber!”

Steve shook his head profusely; trying to remember what Tommy hadn’t eaten for lunch. “Oh, no. It was the uh, the meatloaf,”

“The meatloaf? That’s your own fault, man,”

Steve let out a silent sigh of relief. Tommy eyed him still, as if he was searching for something. “You know . . . you’re always in the bathroom, man,”

“No, I’m not . . .”

“Yeah, you are. You’re always in there after lunch and shit,”

“That’s not true, I just – y’know, I uh, gotta squeeze in a mid day jerk off,”

Tommy laughed loudly and dropped the subject. All Steve could do was wonder how his best friend, who never noticed anything that didn’t have tits, could notice something that his parents couldn’t.

By the time freshman year began, Steve was in love with Tommy. He knew it because of the way his heart fell from his stomach, then bounced up into his throat within seconds of seeing him. At night, he dreamed of holding him close, of kissing him, of holding his hand and of doing less innocent things. Every time Tommy so much as said his name, Steve thought that it sounded like magic.

He was ashamed. He knew that it was dirty and wrong and creepy, but he couldn’t help it.

Steve dated girls, sure, and he loved being with them, don't get him wrong, but they weren't Tommy. They were just pretty girls who threw themselves at him the second he gave them even a little bit of his attention. He slept with them and dated them for a bit, but he found himself growing bored of them quickly. (It wasn't until later on in his life where he'd realize that that was because he was still holding out hope for Tommy).

He had tons of friends, a shit ton of them, actually, but the only two that truly mattered to him at the end of the day were Tommy and Carol. That's what made Steve feel the grossest – the fact that he was friends with Carol, and secretly pining after boyfriend. Every time they broke up, Steve saw a glimmer of hope. It was so dumb, because Tommy was straight and would never be interested in him, but he couldn't find it in himself to let go of that hope. Carol would cry to Steve, talking about what an asshole Tommy had been and Steve would do his best to listen to her side of the story, while also defending Tommy. He still had to be a good friend, which was so fucking stupid because all he wanted to do was tell Carol that she didn't deserve Tommy, even if Tommy was the one in the wrong.

“You're so much smarter than him, you know,” Carol popped her gum and put her arm around Steve's waist as he walked her to the bus.

“Don't forget better looking,” Steve winked at her.

“I don't get why you two are friends. You can do better,”

He knew that she wasn't talking about the awkward unrequited affections scenario (because how the fuck would she know?), but it still made him think for a while. If he was a girl, and what he was feeling for Tommy was normal, would he deserve better? Tommy could be a dick sometimes, but he was still funny and pretty and loyal and could occasionally be sweet. If Steve were a girl, he would chase after Tommy in a second, whether he reciprocated his feelings or not. But Steve was a boy and at the end of the day, his feelings were unnatural and perverted.

He spent hours crying in his bathroom, trying to purge all of his love away. It never worked and when he flushed his shame down the

toilet, he wished that Tommy were there to hold him and comfort him.

Those quiet moments with Tommy were the only times that Steve truly felt at peace. He forgot about how gross his feelings were for that small period of time, and just focused on the sound of Tommy's voice. No matter what it was that Tommy was talking about, Steve found himself completely fascinated by it. Everything he said was so important because Tommy was so important. God, all Steve wanted to do was be his boyfriend. It wasn't fair. Why couldn't it just be okay to have feelings for another boy?

They got drunk off wine coolers one night at Tommy's place, just the two of them. He was so wrong, and he knew that, but it felt so romantic, almost like a date. And so Steve let himself be stupid – he let himself learn forward and kiss Tommy on the mouth.

Tommy pulled away almost instantly, saying nothing for a few seconds and Steve felt hopeful, like maybe he was considering it. It was a good sign. At least he hadn't called him a faggot and punched him.

“Don't ever do that again, man,” Tommy said, clear as day.

Steve turned bright red.

He walked home and threw up until he saw stars.

Tommy never brought it up and Steve was thankful. Still, it always seemed to be there. When Tommy would do something stupid and Steve would tell him to stop, Tommy would look at him as if to say “You kissed me, remember?” Steve would shut up. He didn't want Tommy to tell anyone, but he also didn't want Tommy to be angry with him.

Carol invited Steve over one night at the beginning of sophomore year under the pretense of helping her study. Steve knew better, knew that no girl invited a guy over just to study (especially when she and Tommy had broken up for the hundredth time a week ago). They smoked pot on her porch together, chatting about generic things, neither of them mentioning Tommy, although he was the only

thing on their minds. Carol was gorgeous, and she gave Steve compliments that he knew were genuine. She was his friend and he admittedly did love her, just not in the way that he loved Tommy.

That was about 20% of the reason why he slept with her that night.

She came on to him, sure, but he didn't put a stop to it.

"You're so fucking hot," she whispered as she tore his shirt off once they got upstairs to her room. "I've always thought you were so fucking hot,"

Steve kissed her neck tenderly. "Tommy can't know about this. You can't tell him,"

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" she rolled her eyes.

"I think you're beautiful," Steve smirked and she giggled, pushing his head down to her breasts.

Steve thought about Tommy the whole time. This was Tommy's girl. Tommy had had sex with her a thousand times before. It made Steve feel closer to Tommy. Like maybe the three of them were in some fucked up orgy, but it wasn't fucked up because Steve had never touched Tommy the way he'd touched Carol that night. Carol had been with Tommy, though, and that was what mattered to Steve at the end of the day. He'd been inside of her like Steve had, and they'd both touched a part of her that no one else had.

On Monday, Tommy and Carol were back together. Steve hated himself for nearly crying when he saw them kiss.

He was a piece of garbage. He was a freak. He was worse than that, because at least freaks only liked one or the other. Steve was like an alien; he was some abnormal creature that didn't belong in the world. That's what he told himself each time he shoved his fingers down his throat.

The first time Steve laid eyes on Nancy Wheeler, he knew he was done for. It was like no one else in the world mattered anymore. It was like he didn't need to feel for Tommy anymore. It was like he could give up on ever having feelings for anybody else because this girl was the one. She was the girl he was going to marry. She was beautiful, she was smart, she was interesting, she was caring, she was everything that he wasn't. It took everything in Steve not to tell her that he was in love with her the moment they met.

Nancy seemed charmed by him. She made out with him, she laughed at his lame jokes. She wanted to spend time with him. For the first time, Steve felt like he mattered. Like he was special. He hadn't thrown up since the moment their lips touched. And every time they kissed, Steve could see a future in the black of his eyelids. They had a giant house together with a million kids running around. Nancy worked some fancy job while he stayed home and cleaned and took care of the children. Maybe that made him even more of a queer, but being with a girl couldn't make him queer. It made him normal.

Barb disappeared. It was all Steve's fault and he prayed every day that Nancy wouldn't figure that out and leave him. If he hadn't been so stupid, the girl would still be around.

Nancy disappeared along with her, ditching Steve to spend all of her time with the Byers boy. The Byers boy who'd watched them have sex like some pervert. Nancy must've thought that was hot. Maybe she liked that sort of thing. Maybe she thought Steve was a jackass for breaking his camera. Steve maintained that he did the right thing. He had to protect Nancy; she was all that mattered to him in the world.

Tommy and Carol said that he was crazy. "You can't let some bitch treat you like that," Tommy had said.

"Don't fucking call her that,"

"Look at that, Carol. She's even made Stevie grow some balls," Tommy chuckled, even though nothing was funny. "You've never stood up to me before,"

Steve just shook his head. He'd fight Tommy a million times if it meant being with Nancy. What he felt for her was so much stronger than what he'd felt for him.

But then he'd seen Nancy in her room with Byers.

It was like the entire world was crashing down, falling on his shoulders. He could hear his mother's voice in his ear, talking to him just the week before about how she'd caught his father cheating yet again. Steve had sworn to her that he would never cheat and he'd meant that. He'd seen how it had destroyed his mother's self worth. This was Nancy, though. Nancy Wheeler was a much better person than Steve Harrington. If she would cheat on him, there had to be something severely wrong with him.

He knew there was something wrong with him. He'd always known that. Nancy must've known, too. She must've figured it out somehow. She was so god damn smart – of course she'd figure out his biggest secret.

Tommy had called her a slut, written it in giant letters so that everyone in town would know. Carol held Steve's hand and told him "She's not worth it," and Steve wished more than anything that he could believe her. When Nancy slapped him across the face, he knew that he deserved it. Even if Nancy had cheated, he was the one at fault.

"It's not my fault, baby. I try so hard for him," his mom cried into his shoulder.

"I know, Mom,"

"I wish I could make him love me,"

"He does love you," Steve had said, even though they both knew that it was a lie.

Steve had been wrong about the cheating because of course he had. He couldn't believe he would ever accuse Nancy of something so

horrible. Nancy wasn't the horrible one.

He called Byers a queer, knowing damn well that he was the queer. He said despicable things about Will Byers and about Lonnie Byers and about Joyce Byers and he was a fucking dick. He was a piece of shit. His father had said those things, told him about how the Byers were "white trash" and about how pathetic they were. Steve didn't know why he'd listen to what his waste of space father had said.

Byers beat the crap out of him. Steve didn't stand a chance and he knew then that it must be obvious to everyone that he was a fairy if he couldn't even take Jonathan Byers. Tommy and Carol took care of him the best that they could and Steve didn't want them to. He new that he'd fucked up majorly. Byers was a good person. He didn't deserve to hear those awful things, especially because they weren't true. And Steve loved Nancy. So what if she had cheated? He could still fight for her. He could be the better person. He could not be an asshole and maybe if he were the luckiest person in the world, she'd come back to him.

Steve told Tommy and Carol to fuck off. It was the hardest thing that he'd ever done in his life. Tommy got in his face, reminded him that he couldn't take a punch. They both knew what he meant – *"You're a faggot, Steve. You love me. I'll tell the entire fucking school about what you did, about how you got your queer germs all over me. Give up now. Do what I say."*

He loved Tommy. He loved him so much. He was his first love, but . . . maybe that wasn't all good. Maybe it wasn't healthy to love somebody who didn't love you back.

And Steve loved Nancy more. Nancy was the most important thing in the world to him. If Tommy told the whole school, fuck it. At least he'd have tried to make it up to Nancy.

He scrubbed those awful words off of the movie theater. He considered writing 'STEVE HARRINGTON IS A FAG' instead, but didn't want to make more work for the people who owned the place.

There's really no story leading up to how he ended up in the Byers'

place, fighting a god damn monster. He just got there and that was it. He could've just pussied out and ran away, but he didn't, and Steve is proud of himself for that. Nothing would ever hurt Nancy Wheeler as long as he had a say in it.

Nancy explained things later, when he drove her home from the hospital. Nothing made sense, but that was okay. She told him she needed time to think things over, and that was okay, too. He deserved to get dumped. Steve had pulled Jonathan aside after everything, apologized over and over for every fucked up thing that he'd said. He'd gotten down on his knees for Nancy, and cried, telling her how sorry he was.

"You're an ass," Nancy had said.

"I know, I know. I don't deserve you, I know. I just – I'll do anything. Whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. And I was . . . Jonathan . . . he was right, I was wrong. I understand . . . he's good. I'm shit. I get it," Steve was full on crying then, feeling even more like a freak. "I just . . . anything, I will do anything for you. I can't – I've never . . . I've never felt like this about anyone,"

It was the most honest he'd ever been with a girl and he'd thought that maybe it's what Nancy needed to hear. Steve wanted to tell her he loved her, but thought that it might be too much, too soon.

Steve purged for the entire month that Nancy made him wait. It felt almost foreign doing so after weeks of staying clean, but it brought him pain. Maybe it would make up for what he'd put her and Jonathan through. Finally, Nancy showed up on his doorstep and kissed him.

He'd never felt so alive.

Most nights, Steve thought of Barb.

How could he not? That thing had taken her in his backyard, and he'd been too distracted to even notice. He knew that Nancy probably

blamed herself, but he knew that he was the one to blame. Every time Nancy forced him to eat dinner with Barb's parents, he felt like screaming. He felt like tearing his lungs out from his chest and stomping them into the ground. The reality was that he couldn't say a thing to anyone about what had happened. The government had been clear that if he ever opened his mouth, they'd kill him – or worse, the people close to him.

Nancy didn't seem to understand that.

Steve wondered if she would risk his life to be able to tell people.

He definitely would if he were her.

On the nights where Nancy didn't stay over, Steve chain smoked cigarettes next to his pool. Now that he was seventeen, his parents stayed out of town for extended periods of time. It would be almost dumb to say that he missed them, because they were never around even when they were home, but he hated being in that empty house all by himself. Someone had fucking died there, all thanks to him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered during a freezing night in March. "I'm really fucking sorry,"

Nancy had told him that Barb hated him. Steve didn't know why she would tell him that (it was almost like she wanted him to feel even worse), but it made him feel even shittier. Barb probably didn't want an apology from him if she hadn't liked him, but he figured that she deserved one.

"I'm sorry you hated me. I'm sorry that you were right for hating me. I am a dick. I am a bad influence. I am everything you said I was. But I really, really, really love Nancy. I won't do anything to hurt her again. I'm trying so fucking hard to deserve her, I really am. I can promise you that. And I can promise you that I'm so, so sorry for leaving you outside. If I could take that night back, I would. I would do anything to bring you back. It isn't fair. I'm sure that you wish the demogorgon had taken me instead. I'm pretty sure Nancy wishes that too . . . it's okay. But it's not okay that you're not here and I'm so, so, so sorry. I really am. I'm so fucking sorry,"

He ran upstairs and puked his guts out.

Nancy hadn't noticed that he had a problem with food. When he ate a ton in one sitting, she seemed to think that he was just being a guy. Part of Steve wished that she would just pick up on something and call him out, but another part of him was thankful, because that meant he could keep doing it.

The first time Steve told Nancy that he loved her, they weren't doing anything special. They were doing homework at a diner, and he thought that she just looked so beautiful scrunching up her nose at a particularly hard question. "I love you," It felt so natural, probably because he thought it every time he looked at her. This time, though, it just slipped out.

Nancy looked up at him, and she looked almost surprised. She gave him a half smile and muttered, "I love you, too,"

After that, Steve told her all the time. Every time they had sex, no matter how rough it was (because Nancy liked it rough, which Steve felt honored to know), he always said 'I love you' at least twice. Every time they parted, he'd kiss her goodbye and then tell her. It wasn't until later that Steve realized that Nancy didn't say it back most of the time and when she did, she always said it second.

His parents loved Nancy. They'd only met a handful of times, but his father always made a point of mentioning what a lovely girl she was. Nancy was any parent's dream. She was absolutely perfect. Steve loved being able to show her off, as if to say, "Look at this fucking amazing woman who loves me,"

"She's great, Steven. Beautiful," his father said after Steve walked Nancy out to her mother's car.

"And so smart! She's an honors student! I mean, that's impressive," said his mother.

"How'd you manage that one?"

"Trust me, Dad, I really don't know," Steve stuffed his hands into his back pockets. "I'm kind of waiting to wake up and find out she

was just a dream,”

“Ted Wheeler’s a good man. This’ll look good for us,”

Nancy’s father was selfish and didn’t give a shit about her. Steve despised him and was only polite to him because Nancy had asked him to be. He couldn’t say that to his dad, though. Steve was happy that his father approved of his girlfriend. He’d spent so long being afraid that his father would find out how he felt about boys, that it was nice to be able to introduce a girl to him and have him like her. He could think that his son was normal and that he didn’t have anything to be ashamed of.

Nancy Wheeler didn’t love him. Nancy Wheeler had never loved him. Nancy Wheeler saw him as a consolation prize because Jonathan Byers hadn’t wanted her. Nancy Wheeler had unloaded her true feelings while she was drunk off of spiked punch. He wasn’t even worth being told off while sober.

Nancy blamed him for Barb and Steve had always known that, but it still really hurt to have to hear. She thought he was bullshit, that nothing about him mattered because it was all fake. How could she think he was fake? He’d been so honest with her. Okay, maybe not completely honest, but he’d been honest in everything he’d ever told her. And God, he loved her so fucking much. Even when she was telling him how bullshit he was, all he could think was that he loved her.

And this whole time, she hadn’t loved him.

He had fooled himself into thinking that he was good enough for her.

Nancy cheated on him with Jonathan Byers later. She hadn’t even had the dignity to break up with Steve properly. She just assumed that he knew that it was over. Why couldn’t she be honest with him sober? Why couldn’t she say to his face that she didn’t love him? It wasn’t fair. Or maybe it was.

He threw up again after the party. He threw up again after she'd pulled him aside during practice. He threw up again after Will Byers is safe and the upside down was closed (although that admittedly, didn't have much to do with Nancy).

It was a good month before Nancy spoke to him again. The last time, she'd left the kids in his hands so that she could go off to protect Jonathan. He'd thought that it was fucked up that she'd been so willing to leave her brother with someone she thought was inadequate, but he'd never admit that. Nancy was perfect in his eyes. She came up to him at lunch and asked if she could sit there. She talked about things that didn't matter, about homework and about the weather.

"What do you want, Nancy?" he asked, finally. "What did you come over here to say?"

She paused for a moment. "I love him, Steve. I just thought that I should tell you that. That I owed you that,"

Steve couldn't yell at her like he wanted to because he still felt that this was his fault. Instead, he just scratched at his nose. "I'm happy for you,"

"You don't look it,"

"Sorry," he forced a smile. "There. See? I'm thrilled,"

Nancy bit her lip. Steve wanted her to stay there so badly that he kept talking. "How is it, then? Being in love?"

"It doesn't feel real, sometimes. I feel like I'm dreaming, like I'm gonna wake up one day and Jonathan won't even exist. After everything we've been through, I feel like maybe we don't deserve to be together. You know?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know,"

"It drives me crazy sometimes. But I'm gonna stick it out anyway. I knew you'd understand that," Steve looked up at her, making eye contact for the first time. "That's what I always loved about you, Steve. Brave."

Steve stood up instantly, pushing his tray out in front of him. "I have to go . . ."

"What?"

"I'll talk to you later, Nance . . ."

He ran to the nearest bathroom and waited until it was empty so that he could stick his fingers down his throat. Nancy had never loved him. She didn't give a shit about him. She thought he was a piece of dirt. Why was she lying to him now? Why was she trying to make it seem like there was anything about him that she admired? Jonathan was her knight in shining armor. He was everything that Nancy wanted. Steve was nothing; absolutely nothing and he'd always be nothing.

He had no friends. His parents were always gone. He wasn't even the best player on the team anymore. He definitely wasn't going to college. There was no fucking point to being a better student or a better person now.

All there was to do was drive Dustin around and smoke until it gave him cancer and he could finally die. Maybe if he died, everyone would be happier.

He sat on a bench outside the town pharmacy, nursing a water bottle filled with vodka in one hand and smoking a cigarette with the other. He didn't want to go home to his big, empty house and had taken to staying out as late as he could.

"Hey sexy," Steve turned his head to see Carol. Her tone wasn't condescending, but he knew she was there to rub in his suffering.

"Fuck off, Carol,"

"That was rude," she mocked offense. "I thought we were closer than that,"

"I'm not in the mood, alright? Please just leave me alone," He hadn't spoken directly to her or Tommy since the blow up over a year ago. He really didn't need to be reminded of it now.

Carol ignored his words and took a seat next to him. She took the cigarette from him without asking, and brought it to her lips, blowing smoke out into the night sky. They were practically alone on the street with nearly everyone else having gone home for the night. Steve wanted to ask what Carol was doing out, but thought against it. "I heard about Wheeler and the pervert. I'm sorry," she said, handing him his cigarette back.

"Yeah, right."

"No, really. That sucks,"

Steve nodded, neither confirming nor denying.

They sat in silence for a bit, passing his cigarette back and forth.

"Tommy misses you, I think. He'd never admit it, but I think he does. Billy's hot, but he's kind of a shit. He doesn't laugh ever and he scares me, sometimes," Carol said after a while. "Tommy tells me that Billy's awesome, but I think he just says it because he doesn't want to admit that he wants you back,"

Steve wondered if Carol knew how romantic she was making it sound.

"I bet if you called him up right now, he'd take you back in an instant,"

"Are you saying that I should hang with you guys again?" Steve turned to face her for the first time.

Carol shrugged. "I'm saying it would be nice,"

"I can't,"

"Why not? It's not like you have other options,"

"That time in my life is over. It's time to move on,"

"Your loss," said Carol. Steve grunted. She wasn't giving up on talking with him, though. "Why don't you just fight Byers for her if she's so great?"

“I can’t just do that,”

“Why not?”

“Because she loves him,” Steve admitted and it hurt to say out loud. “She doesn’t love me. She never loved me . . .”

Carol’s expression softened. “I’m sure that’s not true,”

“Oh, it is true. She told me,”

“And she just let you fucking believe that she loved you for a year? I saw the two of you together. You looked like a fucking puppy, following after her, trying to make up for the movie theater shit. And she didn’t even love you?” she asked. Steve swallowed some vodka and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “That’s so messed up. Fuck her. What a cunt,”

“Don’t talk about her like that!” Steve insisted.

Carol shook her head. “Oh my God, and you’re still fucking whipped. Why do you act like she’s so great?”

“She is,”

“Is that why you let her step all over you? Treat you like dirt?”

Steve tossed the cigarette to the ground and stepped on it, twisting his foot a few times to destroy it. “I guess I . . . I don’t know. I guess maybe I deserve it,”

“No, you don’t. Fuck that. Fuck her. Just say it, just this once, say it. ‘Fuck her,’”

“I can’t . . .”

“Just once. ‘Fuck her.’”

“I can’t,” Steve repeated.

“Fuck her.”

“No.”

“Jesus Christ,” Carol threw her hands in the air and slammed them down harshly at her side.

Steve felt tears welling up in his eyes. “I can’t, Carol. I just . . . I just fucking love her. I fucking love her so much,”

And then he was full on sobbing, his entire body shaking. His water bottle fell, pouring out onto the street. It was the first time Steve had really cried about Nancy, preferring to purge away all his sadness. Carol scooted over and opened her arms to him and to his surprise, he fell into them, resting his forehead in the crook of her arm. She rubbed his back and pulled him in close, like his mother used to when he was little. Neither of them said anything and she just let him cry for as long as he needed to.

Dustin Henderson thought Steve was the greatest thing since sliced bread. The other kids didn’t seem to like him that much, but Dustin adored him. Steve adored him too. He adored all the kids. They were the only good things in his life. They were sweet and nice and innocent and just so *good*. He got angry thinking about how much fucked up shit had happened to them because they deserved it least of anyone.

Steve had nightmares about that time in the tunnels. The nightmares were always about not being able to save the kids. The kids had made him feel useful that day, as if he had some purpose in the world. He tried to hold on to that feeling during his worst days.

Dustin invited him to a D&D campaign one night. Steve really didn’t want to go. The others didn’t like him and he didn’t feel being treated like shit by someone else. But Dustin was the only person in his life that cared about him and he wasn’t about to screw that up, so he said yes. He even made snacks for the occasion, hoping that it would make the kids like him a little more.

They loved the snacks. At least Lucas and Max did. Mike glared at him like he was an insect and Will sat quietly, not making much noise. Steve could relate, as he said almost nothing all night and just watched them debate and have fun. It comforted him to just listen to them. For a couple of hours, he didn’t mind being alive.

“You should come next time, Steve,” said Mike at the end of the night. Steve didn’t know what he possibly could’ve done to change Mike’s mind about him within a couple of hours. “It makes Dustin happy,”

Okay. So he didn’t really want Steve around. Big shock.

Max asked him for a ride home and she spent nearly the entire time ranting to him and Dustin about how she didn’t understand the *Star Wars* obsession that the boys had. When she got out of the car, Dustin said, “Yep. I’m totally over her now.”

Steve laughed.

Lucas called Steve (Steve didn’t even know that Lucas knew his phone number) the following week, saying that his parents had told him that he either needed to find a babysitter for his sister, or he had to stay home from the arcade. Steve understood and drove over, introducing himself to Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair, who both fell in love with him instantly. He’d forgotten how charming he could be when he wanted to.

Lucas’s sister, Erica, didn’t like him at first. By the end of the night, she had put Steve’s hair into millions of pigtails and they were playing Barbies. She was funny and sassy and so clearly Lucas’s sister. He obviously influenced her a lot, even though Erica insisted that Lucas was a nerd.

“Steve has to come over next time you guys go out!” Erica insisted when her parents came home. “He’s so much more fun than Lucas!”

“Is that so?” Mrs. Sinclair smiled as Mr. Sinclair tried to pay him.

Steve shook his head, “No, no, no. It’s cool. Don’t worry about it,”

“Don’t be silly,” Mr. Sinclair insisted and shoved a ten dollar bill into Steve’s hand before he could protest any further.

Joyce Byers called him a couple of days later, saying that Mrs. Sinclair had given him a great recommendation, and asked him if he’d be able to watch Will. Steve felt gross about it because that meant that Jonathan was also out and that meant that he was

definitely with Nancy, but he agreed. He still felt so guilty about what he'd said about the Byers family, and hoped that he'd be able to partially make up for it one day.

"I'm so sorry to ask, it's just that I'm still hesitant to leave Will alone after everything," Joyce said once Steve arrived. Will clearly disagreed, because he immediately insisted to Steve that he didn't need a babysitter. Steve agreed with him (even though he really agreed with Joyce) and told him not to think of it as babysitting.

"Think of it as just two guys hanging out. Pretend I'm one of your friends. What would you do with your friends?"

Will smiled and turned on the TV set, saying that he really wanted to watch the new episode of *Family Ties*.

"I love that show!" said Steve.

"Really?"

"Yeah, totally! Michael J. Fox is awesome." And by that, Steve meant that he had a giant crush on Michael J. Fox.

Afterwards, Will sat at the kitchen table drawing pictures while Steve scooped him out some ice cream ("Don't tell your mom"). They chatted about school and movies, and later, Steve washed the dishes while Will played him a song that he was really into. At the end of the night, Will showed the picture he'd been drawing to Steve with a bright grin on his face. It was of the two of them; Steve was holding his baseball bat and Will was holding his crayons. They were both smiling, like they were friends.

Steve hung it over his desk in his room. It was the best gift he'd ever received.

That night was the first night that he hadn't thrown up in a long time.

The kids invited him to their next campaign and it was completely different than the time before. Steve laughed with them, he teased them, he learned some of their inside jokes. Even Mike warmed up to him. At the end of the night, Will hugged him, taking Steve by

surprise.

“You’re a good guy, Steve,” he said, his face touching Steve’s stomach. “Thank you for protecting my friends from me,”

Steve thought that he was going to cry as he wrapped his arms around Will, hugging him back.

Steve painted Eleven’s nails and braided Max’s hair. That had become their thing ever since Max mentioned that Eleven wanted to know how to do makeup and Max herself didn’t know. Steve volunteered to teach them. He knew enough about girls to get the hang of it pretty quickly. They borrowed some of Max’s mother’s makeup and Steve did his best to put it on Eleven. It didn’t look good, so they washed it off. He painted her nails to make up for it and they looked amazing. “Pretty,” El said.

“You have to do my hair,” Max insisted. “No one does hair better than you,”

Steve laughed and combed through her hair before braiding it into two long plaits.

Max and El adored him after that. Hopper liked Steve a lot too, and was more willing to let El go places if he knew that Steve would be there. The three of them went to go see romantic comedies together and sometimes when El wasn’t allowed to go out, Steve would stay in and watch soap operas with her. He got way too involved in the plot and would debate the characters and relationships with El.

He should’ve felt like a fairy for being into all that girly stuff, but he didn’t. It actually made him feel better about himself. Steve realized that he’d been into that stuff for his whole life and that he’d repressed up until now. Being somewhat honest about who he was wasn’t so terrible, especially because El and Max liked him even more than they had before.

And Steve didn’t think anyone had ever given him a bigger compliment then when El had called him “friend.”

At his high school graduation, all of the kids show up for him. His parents were shocked to see him bombarded in a group hug by thirteen year olds and Steve didn't have an explanation for them other than "They're just kids I babysit sometimes." And the best thing was when 'Steven Harrington' was called out, he got the loudest applause out of anyone.

"You're gonna leave us now," said Dustin. Steve had taken the kids out to eat, not wanting to spend time with anyone else. At the end of the night, he'd dropped everyone else back at their houses, and Dustin was the only one left in his car.

"What?"

"You're gonna go off to college and forget all about us. You're gonna make so many friends and get a really great girlfriend and never talk to us again," Dustin sighed.

"I'm not going to college," said Steve. "I thought you knew that,"

"Why not?"

"Because I applied and they rejected me. I'm staying in Hawkins," He thought that it would make Dustin happy, but it didn't. Dustin's expression turned from sad to angry.

"No! Apply to more schools and go to college, get out of this town!"

"That's not really how it works. I can't just apply to schools *now*. My grades were terrible. No school would accept me,"

"Well, if I were a school, I would accept you," Dustin crossed his arms over his chest.

Steve smiled. "Thanks, man,"

"You hate Hawkins. Why would you stay here? What are you even gonna do here?"

“I don’t know. I figured I’ll apply for some jobs and see what works out,” He’d considered working for his father, but decided it against it in the long run. The last thing he wanted was for his dad to be his boss. “And I don’t hate Hawkins. It’s just that nobody here really gives a shit about me,”

“You have us,” Dustin reminded him.

“Which is like the main reason I’m sticking around,” Steve muttered. He was so hesitant to admit to caring about people after what had happened with Nancy. With Dustin though, he knew the feeling was mutual. Dustin constantly told him how much he meant to him.

Dustin gave him that giant smile that Steve loved so much and leaned over to hug him. “You’re my best friend, Steve,”

“You’re my best friend too, buddy,”

Dustin invited him inside, saying that he had a present that he wanted to give him. He made Steve wait outside for a few minutes, and when he let him inside, Mrs. Henderson was standing there with a cake reading ‘Congrats, Steve!’ There were streamers and balloons all over the kitchen, as if Steve was Mrs. Henderson’s son. She seemed way prouder of him than his own parents were. He hugged her tight and thanked her so much. The three of them sat down, eating cake and making jokes. It felt like what a real family felt like. He always adored hanging with the Hendersons, but it wasn’t until right then that he thought that maybe they could be his family.

Steve promised Mrs. Henderson that he would come over for dinner at least once a week. He was so grateful for her existence and so grateful that she cared so much about him. Dustin was the absolute light of his life and Steve owed it to him to show him how much he meant to him. No one had ever treated him so kindly before. It felt almost foreign to Steve to have someone want him around for non-sexual reasons.

He got a job working at a diner. It wasn’t something his parents were happy about, but they hadn’t sat him down yet to talk with him about his future. Steve had prepared his answers for that

conversation. He'd tell them that he was saving up money so that he could get his own place and after that, he didn't know. But he'd keep quiet about it so that it didn't affect them.

Steve had zero idea what he wanted to do with his life. Up until the past couple of months with the kids, he hadn't even had a reason to live. Everything now was about staying alive, about trying to keep himself happy. He'd never been a fan of work of any kind. And he wasn't like Nancy or Jonathan – he wasn't meant to get a fancy job and succeed. Besides, what if the Upside Down decided to open up again? What he did for a living wasn't going to matter much then.

Joyce Byers threw an end of the summer party, which was really just a celebration for Will surviving. Attending was literally the last thing that Steve wanted to do, especially because he knew Jonathan would be there, but for Will, he'd do anything. So he showed up and brought flowers for Joyce and a new X-Men comic for Will. Jonathan shook his hand awkwardly and thanked him for coming. Steve said nothing, just smiled and wandered off to the back corner of the room to hang out with Lucas.

Nancy and Mike showed up late, Nancy complaining about how Mike had taken forever to pick out something to wear. She kissed Jonathan for a good ten seconds, and Steve felt like a creep for watching. He loved Nancy still, but he hadn't gotten that longing ache in his heart since that night with Carol. Now he felt it again and it burned harshly, like his insides were on fire.

“Chill,” said Lucas.

“I am chill,”

“Just don't freak out,”

“When have I ever freaked out?”

Lucas gave him a look and then shook his head. “Just keep telling yourself that you deserve better, alright? Maybe you'll stop liking her if you convince yourself that she doesn't deserve you,”

Steve snorted.

“You *do* deserve better, man,” It was very rare that Lucas would get sentimental and Steve felt touched that he would choose to get sentimental with him.

He patted Lucas on the shoulder and stood up to go and get some food.

Nancy accosted him in the kitchen. “Hey. I didn’t know you were coming,”

“Will invited me. He’s such a sweet kid,”

“Yeah, Mike told me you’ve been hanging out with them lately,”

“Yep,”

“It’s weird. I never would’ve pinned you as the babysitting type,”

“What would you have pinned me as then, Nancy?” Steve put his plate down. That burning feeling was growing larger, like a goddamn forest fire.

“I don’t know,”

“I love kids. I’ve always wanted kids. I used to say that all the time,”

Nancy turned around to make sure that no one had noticed Steve’s tone of voice. “Relax. Please don’t do this. It’s Will’s day.”

“Don’t act like you give a shit about Will. All you care about is Jonathan. That’s all that matters to you, isn’t it? Jonathan, Jonathan, Jonathan. That’s all that ever mattered, even when he was jerking it to those pictures he took of us fucking,”

“Oh My God, Steve –“

“Don’t, alright? Just don’t. Just . . .” He knew that he should’ve listened to Lucas and not freaked out, but he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t stand seeing her kiss Jonathan. “Just tell me why I wasn’t good enough. Tell me what I could’ve done differently,”

Nancy looked at him with sympathy for a second, but it went away just as quickly as it had appeared. "I'm not having this conversation here,"

"You never want to have this conversation. You've ignored me since you went off and cheated on me,"

She stared down at her shoes.

"Just give me an answer. Please. I'll leave if you just tell me what I could've done to make you love me,"

"Nothing!" Nancy blurted out like she hadn't meant to say it. She clearly regretted it instantly, because it was followed by an, "I just – you can't make someone love you, Steve. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," It took everything in Steve not to cry. "That's all I needed to know,"

He stormed out of the house, being careful not to slam the door behind him.

He drove out to the quarry and sat in his car for hours, just crying. Dustin was right. Staying in Hawkins was a bad idea. He needed to get the fuck out and go somewhere where he'd never have to see Nancy again. She was like the second coming of Tommy – a person he loved who didn't love him back. Steve didn't think that he could take anymore of that.

He walked over to a patch of grass and shoved his fingers down his throat until his eyes were watering, but nothing came out. Fuck. He'd waited too long. He was such a fucking idiot. "You can't even do this right," Steve said before bursting into tears again.

Fairy. Queer. Faggot. Freak.

That's all you're ever going to be, he thought as he kicked the side of his car. *You're nothing. You don't matter.*

Why couldn't Nancy love him? He wished that she could've fooled herself into thinking that he was good enough for her and just stayed with him. They could have that beautiful life that he'd planned for

them and he'd make sure she was never sad again. Jonathan could probably do that better than he could, though. Jonathan was so much better at everything. Why had Nancy told him she loved him when she didn't? She should've just been honest with him. It would've saved him from so much pain.

Fuck.

Steve got home to find his parents waiting for him. All he wanted was to go upstairs and cry himself to sleep. He didn't want to be scolded; to be made to feel even worse about himself.

"We need to talk, Steven," said his father.

"Can we do it tomorrow? I'm really not feeling up to it,"

"I'm ready to talk now. Sit down,"

He tried his best not to groan as he slouched down into an armchair.

"What are you going to do about your future?"

Fuck. Not this talk now. At least he'd prepared for it. "I'm gonna keep working at the diner until I can save up enough money to move out. I'll get my own place and see where I go from there,"

"You really could've gotten a basketball scholarship," said his mother. Steve hated that his failures seemed to be the one thing she and his dad could agree on. "I don't understand why you didn't try,"

"Because I don't care about basketball anymore,"

"You don't care about anything anymore!" his father insisted. "All you do is mope around and then hang out with those kids. Do you know how that makes us look?"

"Don't be gross, Dad. They're my friends,"

"What ever happened to Tommy and Carol? The team? You used to be so popular. What changed?"

“Me.”

His mom sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. “Baby, we’re just worried that you’re wasting your life,”

Steve didn’t know how to tell her that he didn’t give a shit because his life was meaningless. Instead, he just shrugged.

“You don’t have anything to say?” asked his father.

He shook his head.

“This can’t keep going on, Steven. You have to make a change,”

“Why? For you?”

“For this family,” his father clarified. “We have a lot of pull in this world and I don’t want that coming to an end because you screwed up,”

I screw everything up for everyone. I destroy everything I touch.

Steve said nothing. He couldn’t control himself with Nancy earlier but he had to now, because his father’s reaction would be much scarier than hers had been.

“You’re gonna come work for me,” said his father.

“What?”

“I’ve decided. It’ll be good for you. You already have our good name and you can work your way to the top,”

“I don’t want to!” He sounded like a baby and he didn’t care.

“You need some work ethic, sweetheart,” his mother reached over to take his hand and Steve pulled away from her.

“You’ll start on Monday. Be up at 7,” And with that his father exited the room to retreat to his bedroom. Steve’s mother gave him a pitying look but soon followed after her husband.

Steve was left alone.

Working at the stupid firm was miserable, to say the least. All Steve did was get coffee, make copies and take notes for executives. Everyone there was polite to him, but Steve knew it was only because of who his father was. They couldn't give a shit about him. They must've thought that he was some rich kid who'd lucked into this job and didn't deserve to be there, and they weren't wrong.

Still, keeping his diner job had paid off okay and by November, Steve was able to buy a shitty one bedroom apartment on the bad side of town. He didn't care about how different it would be from living in a mansion. He just wanted to get away from his parents. Aside from the shit plumbing and the wiring being faulty, Steve loved it. It was the one good thing to come into his life lately. He could binge as much as he wanted and purge as much as he wanted. He could jerk off to Harrison Ford's picture without the worry of being caught.

Dustin and Mrs. Henderson visited often, usually with a casserole of some sort. Max would stay over on the couch when she needed to get away from Billy. Lucas would bring over a new VHS tape and a bucket of popcorn, and he and Steve would watch it together, giving commentary on the acting. So it wasn't like he was totally lonely living there, especially because he still lived in town.

The kids really were the greatest. They were his reason for living and the days where he didn't see them were long and painful. Those days were made even worse when he'd see Nancy or Jonathan around town, and they'd mutter a hello that really meant "Sorry that you're all by yourself."

Will came out to Steve after Thanksgiving. "You don't hate me, right?"

Steve almost started crying, because how could he ever hate Will? Being gay was supposed to be wrong but nothing about Will was wrong. Will was an absolute gem. "Of course not. Thank you for telling me,"

It made Steve think about himself because of course it did, because he was selfish. Will was fourteen and here he was, so sure of himself.

Steve supposed that it was because he'd already been through hell, so he must've thought it wasn't a big deal compared to the other hardships he'd faced. No one hated Will for it, either. In fact, it just seemed to make them love him more. Everyone told him how brave he was for being honest about it, but Steve wasn't so sure about that. It could've been a really stupid decision to come out. What if his friends decided they were disgusted by him? What if his mother kicked him out? It was a huge risk.

Will was a better person than Steve, though. If Steve had told everyone that he liked men, he was sure to get a bad reaction. Will was also just gay. Steve was gay *and* straight. That wasn't a thing that anyone was. People would probably think that he was joking, trying to lessen Will's coming out. Part of Steve wished that he could just be gay or just be straight, because then at least he'd be whole. He wasn't even sure if he was half and half. He had a preference for women he supposed, but that didn't change the fact that he was attracted to men. If he were just gay, his parents would throw him out. No question. They'd made it perfectly clear how they felt about homosexuality. If Steve stayed liking both, he had a better chance at surviving because there was still a chance of him ending up with a woman.

Still, Will's coming out did make Steve realize that being gay couldn't be evil. For the first time in his life, he started coming to terms with his attraction. He even drove out to the city a few miles away and walked into a hole-in-the-wall gay bar. Two years ago, that wouldn't have even been a thought. The men in the bar loved Steve instantly, and Steve was reminded of his early high school years where all the girls fawned over him. To his surprise, he flirted with practically everyone, even the older guys that he didn't think he'd be into. He made out with a man who must've been his father's age in the bathroom, pulling at his graying hair, trying to get as much of him as possible.

Steve felt free.

He went back to the bar every Saturday after that. It quickly became the highlight of his week and it made all the suffering worth it to be able to finally be himself.

But of course, like everything else in Steve's life, it fell to shit. A couple of days before Christmas, a boy a few years older than him bought him a drink and started chatting him up. He was easy on the eyes and had muscles that made Steve want to melt. "So how long have you known you were gay?" The guy asked.

After hooking up with a couple of men, Steve felt like maybe it was okay to be who he was. Everyone at the bar was so open and accepting of everyone. They were sure to understand him. "I'm not gay," he explained.

Muscle man laughed. "Yeah, sure. That's why I saw you here last week making out with Martinez,"

"I'm not gay. I like girls too," said Steve.

"That's what I said when I first started coming here. It's easier than admitting you're a fag,"

Why didn't he understand what Steve was saying? "No. I'm not just saying that. I like boys *and* girls,"

Muscle man chuckled into his beer.

"What's so funny?" Steve asked because he was genuinely wondering.

"It's just not possible, man. You're either a queer or you're a boring old straight person,"

"Well, wouldn't I still be queer if a part of me liked boys?"

"It's all or nothing. You wouldn't be here if you still wanted to sleep with girls, believe me,"

Could that be true? Steve hadn't slept with a man yet but he'd enjoyed kissing men, and that didn't mean he didn't want to hook up with women anymore. Just the other day he'd checked out one of the secretaries at the firm. His lust for women hadn't lessened since coming to terms with the way he felt about men. Did that mean that he really was the only one like him?

“So you’ve never met anyone that stayed liking both?” questioned Steve.

“Oh, I have. They’re usually just hookers. That, or they’re just trying to stick their dick into anything. Everyone wants to blame AIDS on gays, when they should really be blaming it on those whores,”

Steve swallowed harshly. He no longer felt sexy or confident like he had when he walked in. He felt the weight of every bad thing that had ever happened to him and it was like everyone he loved was screaming in his face, calling him a freak. But Steve wasn’t even a freak. Even the freaks didn’t want him, that’s how abnormal he was. Maybe he was just meant to be a hooker, like Muscle Man said. Maybe that’s why God had made him like this. He probably wouldn’t even be good at that. He’d give some poor customer fucking AIDS because he was just a selfish whore. Nothing more.

He left the bar alone. He drove back to Hawkins, pretending that he hadn’t been drinking and pretending that he wasn’t hoping that he’d somehow kill himself on the drive back. But Steve felt the overwhelming need to purge and that hard focus got him to the 7/11 on Main Street in one piece. He needed to buy all the fucking junk food that he could. Eat all of it until he was bursting at the seams.

The world was totally fucking with him. It just wanted things to get worse and worse for him, because Nancy and Jonathan were inside browsing magazines. Steve was too far gone to pay them any mind. He needed to get his food and get back to his apartment.

“Hey Steve,” Nancy said anyway, as if they were on good terms.

Steve didn’t answer. He just kept throwing every greasy treat that he enjoyed into his basket. Nancy and Jonathan exchanged a look. “Steve . . .” said Jonathan.

“Are you alright?” asked Nancy.

“Don’t act like you care,” Steve nearly spat in her face.

“I do care,” She put her hand on his shoulder and he shrugged it

off.

“If you cared you wouldn’t have lied to me for a fucking year and cheated on me with the guy you promised me you didn’t like,” He must’ve looked so pathetic, crying right there in front of both of them. Nothing mattered anymore. He could be as honest as he wanted.

“Don’t do this here, man,” Jonathan muttered, taking an awkward step backwards.

“Fuck you. You don’t know anything. Why – why did you take her away? We could’ve – I could’ve – I could’ve made her happy,” His words were incoherent, a hazy mess, just like him. Nancy wouldn’t even look at him, but Steve looked at her. “I should be fucking dead. Not Barb. I’m sorry that she’s not here and I am,”

“Steve –“

“It’s true. You’ve always wished we could’ve fucking switched places. Is that why you hurt me so bad? To make me pay? I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry, y’know, Nance? I love you. I love you so fucking much that I feel like my heart is gonna fucking fall out of me. I can’t stand the way you look at him and I know that’s bad but I’m just gonna say everything I want to because it doesn’t fucking matter anymore,”

“It does matter, Steve,” Nancy insisted and she looked pissed.

“No, it doesn’t. Nothing matters for me. I don’t have what you guys have. And I never will,”

“Steve –“

“I’m nothing,” he shrugged, opening up a bag of chips and stuffing some in his mouth. “I’m shit. I’m glad you have each other, though, really, I am. Jonathan, you’re normal. You’re . . . normal. You’re not fucked up . . . you’re good for her. I was never any good for Nance. Nancy knew that. Didn’t you, love? You were always so smart. God, I fucking love you to pieces. I’m sorry, alright? Just know that I’m fucking sorry,”

He couldn’t talk to them any longer. This was getting too drawn

out. Nancy and Jonathan didn't need to hear about his problems.

Steve threw a hundred dollar bill at the cashier, muttering, "Keep the change," on his way out the door.

He ate his way through the entire bag of chips on the drive back to his apartment. He'd eaten three twinkies by the time he walked in and the second Steve slammed the door behind him, he flopped down on the couch and went to town on a package of cupcakes. *You stupid, fucking sack of shit. You useless piece of dirt. Of fucking course you can't stop stuffing your face right now.*

The rage was bubbling up inside of him like a fucking volcano. He supposed it had been there for a long while, but it was only becoming overwhelming now. His skin was hot and beads of sweat were falling from his forehead to the tip of his nose. Steve couldn't even eat anymore because of how *angry* he was. He took a cupcake and tossed it across the room, watching it hit the TV. It calmed him only for a second and he thought that maybe breaking things would get rid of this fucking feeling. There was a weight in his chest constricting his breathing and he thought that he was going to choke if he didn't get rid of it right then.

Steve took the baseball bat that he kept next to his bed and slammed it against the wall, immediately making a hole. Thank fucking God everyone in that goddamn building was always making so much noise; otherwise he probably would've been caught. He hit the back of the couch next – multiple times until the hard material finally juttet forward.

His parents didn't love him. Nancy didn't love him. Tommy didn't love him. Anyone who'd ever wanted him had only wanted him for a good time. The whole world was probably gonna be destroyed by the Upside Down at some point. He hadn't been able to protect the kids properly in the tunnels. He'd tried to save Lucas and ended up almost dying. He was a freak of nature. He wasn't meant to fucking exist.

All of those thoughts raced through his head as Steve kneeled over the toilet, throwing up until his stomach ached and he had vomit in his nose. It wasn't enough. All these years, it hadn't been enough. It hadn't changed him at all.

The butcher knife slicing into his wrists did. It made him feel dizzy, and not the kind of dizzy that he got from purging. That would go away. This wouldn't. This was permanent.

He woke up in an unfamiliar white room.

It took him a good thirty seconds to pull himself together, but honestly, he couldn't remember anything.

Hopper was sitting in the corner of the room and he gave Steve a look that read as both disappointment and sympathy. "What's going on?" Steve asked. He looked down at his body to see that his wrists were bandaged up and he had an IV in his left arm.

"A lot, kid," said Hopper, scratching at his forehead.

"Where are my parents?" was the second thing that Steve thought to ask, even though he wasn't shocked to see that they weren't there.

"They uh, they left when the doctors told them you'd be okay. They said they'd come in to see you another time,"

No shock there. "What happened to me?"

"You really don't remember?"

"Obviously not,"

Hopper stood up and walked across the room to get closer to Steve. He cleared his throat and tried to speak, not knowing where to begin. "El . . . she, uh, she woke up screaming late last night. It wasn't a bad dream. It was like – I don't know. But she saw you and she said that it was real. She said you were in trouble. I dropped her off with Joyce and drove over to your building because after everything, I'm not gonna take risks, y'know? I got up there and you were . . . I called an ambulance. You're fine now. You're safe now,"

That didn't explain anything. "But *what* happened?"

“Your place was trashed. Shit was broken. There was food everywhere. Your wrists were bleeding. You cut yourself. You tried to kill yourself,”

Steve wouldn't have done that. He was a lot of fucking things, but he wasn't a pussy. Only pussies tried to kill themselves. Pussies and people who were trying to get attention. He didn't think that he was either. “No . . .”

“I should uh, tell the doctors you're up,” Hopper backed out of the room.

Maybe Steve did want attention though, because he was upset that no one else was here to see him. Hopper was only there because he was a cop and that was his job. His own parents couldn't even be bothered with him. They were definitely embarrassed.

The doctors asked Steve questions that he didn't have the answer to. Or rather, he did have the answers; he just wasn't sure how to put them into words. Yeah, these people were professionals, but they wouldn't understand someone like Steve.

They told him that they knew he had a problem. They said that they'd examined him and they could see damage in his throat and teeth. “You've been hiding it for a long time, haven't you?” asked one of the doctors.

He burst into tears for what must've been the hundredth time in the past twenty-four hours.

They let him cry. They suspected that it was what he needed.

After a while, they went into a long dialogue about the dangers of bulimia. They told Steve that it was an addiction, and that was why he hadn't been able to stop. They told him they were going to help him get better.

Hopper came back in after they left. He looked like he was going to a wake and Steve wanted to remind him that he was still alive. “What happened, Harrington?” he asked. “Since when are you this depressed, suicidal addict?”

It sounded harsh, but it was meant to be caring. Steve shrugged.

“Why didn’t you talk to someone? What about your parents?”

“My parents aren’t even here right now, so you can see how that conversation would’ve gone over,”

Hopper nodded in agreement. “But Steve, you’ve seen so many of the dangers in this world. Is that what this is about? Are you afraid of . . . you know, everything?”

Of course Hopper wouldn’t want to use the term “The Upside Down.” He probably thought it was too childish. “No,” said Steve.

“Then what is it? I know this is hard, but you have so many people who care about you. I need for you to talk to me.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He started to tear up yet again. “Because you’ll hate me.”

Hopper had been fine when Will had come out but Steve wasn’t Will. He also didn’t get what Steve was talking about. “You’re a good man, Steve. There’s nothing that *you* could’ve done to make me hate you,”

He wasn’t a good man at all. He wasn’t brave like Nancy had said. He wasn’t anything good. “I’m a freak. I’m not even a freak because freaks at least fit in with each other. I don’t fit in with anyone,”

“Those kids *love* you. You fit in with them,”

“I couldn’t even protect them that night. It was my only job and I couldn’t even do that,”

“They’re still here so clearly you did protect them,”

He refused to believe that that was true. He shook his head and slouched down, itching at his bandages. “I don’t deserve them,” he whispered.

“I told myself for years that I didn’t deserve good things. You know what it did for the world? Fucking nothing. The second I started believing that I deserved happiness, the world got brighter,”

Steve stared at him, trying to make it look like he believed what he said. He didn’t. He wasn’t Hopper. Hopper would never understand what it was like to be him.

Satisfied for the time being, Hopper left him alone to nap.

What had fucking happened last night? The last thing he could remember was going to the bar in the city. Some guy had mouthed off to him, basically called him a hooker and a whore. Had things really deteriorated so fast after that? Steve had been losing his shit for a while, probably since things had ended with Nancy. If he was being honest, he supposed that a breakdown had been a long time coming. It still made him a pussy.

Dustin and Mrs. Henderson were there when he woke up. Mrs. Henderson had brought him a bouquet of flowers and a teddy bear, and she bombarded Steve with kisses as soon as he opened his eyes. Dustin looked almost afraid to touch him and Steve couldn’t blame him. He didn’t want to see the Hendersons. He didn’t want the Hendersons to have to see him like this. They were so good to him – how could he do this to them? God, he was so heartless.

Mrs. Henderson was talking to him, but Steve was only half listening. He was still a little in shock and he didn’t think that he deserved to have someone fawning all over him, especially someone like Mrs. Henderson. “I’m just so glad you’re okay, sweetheart,” she finished her rant and kissed him on the head again. “We love you so much. We hope you know that,”

“Yeah, I love you guys too,” His throat was dry and he sounded like he hadn’t spoken in days.

Mrs. Henderson patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll let you two talk now. I’m gonna go see if I can get you some water, Steve,”

She left Dustin and Steve alone. Dustin’s arms were crossed and he looked like a concerned mother rather than a teenage boy. “What the

fuck, Steve?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re supposed to contact the party if you’re ever in danger and that includes if you’re in danger from yourself. We would’ve come to assist you,”

“Since when am I apart of the party?”

“Since always! We just assumed that you knew.”

He didn’t deserve to be in the party. As if he could ever save anybody or do any good for anybody. Dustin always had so much faith in him.

“I’m sorry,” Steve muttered, mainly because he didn’t know what else to say.

“I never want anything to happen to you,” Dustin admitted, sadly. He walked over to Steve’s bed and put his hand on top of his. “You’re my family,”

“I don’t deserve to be your family,”

“Why not? What is so wrong with you?”

“Everything,” Steve pulled his hand away.

“You’re cool, you’re funny, you know all the lyrics to every Michael Jackson song ever. You teach me how to do awesome things. You don’t treat me like some kid. You’re nice without trying to be. You dressed up as Doc Brown for Halloween so that Mike could be Marty McFly, even though you really wanted to be Marty. You let Max stay at your house when she’s too afraid to go home. You try and make everyone’s day better. You saved all of us,”

Dustin had stated some facts, which Steve couldn’t dispute, and some opinions, which he could. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to though. He was so fucking exhausted. No matter what he did, Dustin would still think that he was hot shit. Maybe he could be honest with him. Maybe that would be okay. “I didn’t want to die,” he said once

Dustin had quieted down. "I don't want to die. I just – I lost it. I don't know how I didn't lose it sooner, because I've been fucked up for so long. I can't remember a time where I was ever normal and I know everyone thinks I'm the most normal guy around but it's a lie. It's all an act. Or it was. I think Nancy could see right through it. She could tell that I wasn't like everyone else,"

Nancy's smiling face popped into his mind and Steve bit his lip, trying to make it go away. He wanted all of these feelings to just go the fuck away. "I – I – I . . . I like girls. But I like boys too,"

He refused to look Dustin in the eye; too afraid of his reaction. The boy not storming out was a good sign. "You're not supposed to be like that. No one thinks so, not even gay people. I could just be with girls and be normal, but that wouldn't change how I feel about guys. Denying those feelings only makes me feel worse. I think . . . I think that maybe I can't do it. Be on my own. I've been on my own for so fucking long and I've tried to hold it together and I know I failed miserably, but I just wanted to believe that everyone else thought I was normal. I wanted Nancy to think that I deserved her. I wanted her to love me. I can't handle loving people who don't love me back. Nancy, Tommy, my fucking parents . . . none of them gave a shit. Is there so much that's wrong with me that none of them loved me?"

"No, Steve," said Dustin. "You're perfect,"

"I'm a queer. Or not even a real queer, just part of one. I'm a fucking . . . I'm a fucking bulimic. I make myself puke, how gross is that? I'm in the hospital because I tried to kill myself and I don't even remember it. There's too much that's wrong with me,"

"Not to me. Not to Mike or Lucas or Max or Will or Eleven. We all love you! The way you feel about yourself has nothing to do with us. We know you're a good person. We know you saved us. We know you would save us again. We love you so much, Steve. We don't care about any of that shit, okay? We still love you."

Steve had never felt so vulnerable in all his life. "Even if I . . . even if I like girls and boys?"

"Especially then, because it's *you*. I'm proud to know the real you,"

As broken as Steve was, as much help as he needed to get, he could see a bright future ahead of him for the first time. It had taken a fucking emotional breakdown to get there, but at least he'd gotten there. Maybe the kids' opinions could be the only ones that mattered to him. Dustin was right. They loved him for him. There were no ulterior motives; they just loved him. That was the good kind of love; the kind of love that had been missing from Steve's life. For the first time, someone he loved, loved him back. He'd never be able to feel like he deserved that, but at least he had it. At least he could feel it.

His parents didn't matter. Nancy didn't matter (even though she really did). Tommy didn't matter. He'd given his all to them and they'd thrown it in his face. They were the ones in the wrong. Not him. He couldn't help loving so hard that it hurt, and he also couldn't help being inadequate. The people who could accept him for his faults were the people who mattered. Those kids, those wonderful kids, were the people who mattered the most to Steve Harrington.

The rest of them showed up together and gave Steve a giant group hug. Steve was so happy, that he didn't even get upset when Mike gave him flowers that Nancy had asked him to bring. Because fuck Nancy. Mike was the one who cared about him.

Steve told them about who he was.

Max asked if he had a boyfriend. El said, "Cool." Lucas said, "You're not a freak. You're a person." Mike smiled and put his hands in his pockets. He looked thoughtful, like he'd felt the same way that Steve did. Will gave Steve another hug and told him they could be "queers together."

"Don't ever call yourself a queer," was Steve's response. "And I'm not even one,"

"I think you are," said Will. "You like boys. You belong in the same group as me,"

Steve almost cried yet again. "Maybe someday we'll go to one of those gay events then, bud,"

"I want to come too!" said Max.

“Yeah, me too!” said El. “What’s a gay event?”

“We’ll go together! We’ll make a trip out of it!” said Lucas.

“Steve’s just gonna ditch us for some guy once we get there,” Mike teased, punching Steve on the arm lightly.

Steve thought of the past couple of years and how the kids had been the bright light at the end of the tunnel. Max jumped up onto the hospital bed to sit next to Steve and El curled up at her feet. Will sat on Steve's other side, giving Steve little to no room (not that he minded). Dustin pulled a chair over that he and Lucas were currently fighting over. Mike was the only one who stayed standing, but his hand was on the back of the hospital bed as if to say ‘I’m here.’

Steve had paused for a moment, but then said the most honest thing that had ever left his mouth. “I’ll never try and ditch you guys ever again. I’m sticking around. I promise.”

Author's Note:

i'm considering writing a sequel to this about a sober, out-and-proud steve because i also have a million headcanons about that. let me know if that's something you would like. thank you for reading <3